

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T BEIRUT 2196

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-2
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, LE
SUBJ: LEBANESE INTERNAL CRISIS: DISCUSSION WITH MINISTER
OF INTERIOR

1. SUMMARY. MINISTER OF INTERIOR GIVES VENT TO VERY GLOOMY ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION IN LEBANON AND SAYS SARKIS IS NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO FINISH HIS TERM IF HE DOES NOT START TAKING SOME DECISIONS. HE FEELS SARKIS IS TOO RELIANT ON AMERICAN SUPPORT AND SUGGESTS THAT WE SHOULD LET HIM KNOW THAT SUPPORT HAS ITS LIMITS. SALMAN SAYS HIS CABINET COLLEAGUES ARE ALSO DISAFFECTED, AND VERY DISTURBED BY PRESENT SITUATION.

2. CALLED ON MINISTER OF INTERIOR SALAH SALMAN AT HIS REQUEST AT 1200 APRIL 18. SALMAN IS AMERICAN-EDUCATED DRUZE EAR, NOSE AND THROAT SPECIALIST WHO IS PROBABLY BRIGHTEST SINGLE MEMBER OF CABINET BUT WHO HAS NOT BEEN AS EFFECTIVE AS HE MIGHT BE BECAUSE HE IS A LITTLE TOO DIRECT FOR LEBANESE SYSTEM.

3. SALMAN SAID HE WANTED TO SPEAK FRANKLY TO ME ABOUT SITUATION
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IN COUNTRY, WHICH HE FOUND VERY DEPRESSING. IN BRIEF, PRESIDENT SARKIS HAD YET TO TAKE A FIRM DECISION ON ANYTHING IN SIXTEEN MONTHS HE WAS IN OFFICE. IF HE DID NOT START TAKING DECISIONS SOON HE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO REMAIN IN POWER. IF THE CRISIS CAME, SALMAN EXPECTED IT TO LEAD TO PARTITION WITH A GEMAYEL OR CHAMOUN PRESIDING OVER A MARONITE STATE AND SOMEBODY ELSE OVER THE REST OF THE COUNTRY.

4. HE SAID PRESIDENT PERPETUALLY AVOIDED DECISIONS AND LET HIS SUBORDINATES FIGHT IT OUT BETWEEN THEMSELVES. AS A RESULT, NOTHING HAD BEEN DONE ABOUT ANY OF THE GRAVE PROBLEMS FACING THE COUNTRY. HE PERSONALLY FELT AS A DRUZE THAT THE PALESTINIAN DOSSIER HAD TO BE OPENED AND DISCUSSED PUBLICLY, BUT SO DID A LOT OF OTHER THINGS, FIRST OF WHICH WAS THE ARMY. THE ARMY COMMANDER HAD TOO MUCH AUTHORITY AND THE ARMY WAS A MARONITE PRESERVE. MUSLIM OFFICERS HAD NO AUTHORITY.

5. HE WAS NOT CONVINCED THAT INCIDENTS SUCH AS FAYADIYYAH AND AYN AR-RUMMANEH WERE THE WORK OF UNDISCIPLINED ELEMENTS AND SUSPECTED THAT THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A GUIDING HAND BEHIND THEM. THE UNFORTUNATE RESULT, IN ANY CASE, WAS A FURTHER DIMINUTION OF THE PRESIDENT'S STANDING WITH THE POPULACE.

THE MUSLIMS WERE ALREADY DISAFFECTED AND NOW THE CHRISTIANS WERE AS WELL. THE FACT THAT CHAMOUN WAS ATTACKING PRESIDENT, IN FACT IF NOT IN NAME, WAS A VERY ALARMING DEVELOPMENT. MARONITES NORMALLY STOOD BEHIND PRESIDENT AS REPRESENTATIVE OF MARONITE SUPREMACY. THE FACT THEY WERE NOW ZEROING IN ON HIM WAS INDICATION OF HIS WEAKENING POSITION.

6. PRESIDENT IN AVOIDING TAKING DECISIONS SEEMED TO HAVE UNBOUNDED FAITH IN AMERICAN ABILITY TO RESOLVE EVERYTHING. THIS HAD RESULTED IN OVER DEPENDENCE ON U.S. AND IN MY BECOMING REGARDED
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LOCALLY AS A HIGH COMMISSIONER. HE THOUGHT WE SHOULD MAKE IT CLEAR TO SARKIS THAT WHILE WE SUPPORTED HIM, OUR SUPPORT WAS NOT UNLIMITED AND THAT SUPPORT REQUIRED A RESPONSE ON HIS PART.

7. SALMAN SAID CABINET WAS UNFORTUNATELY SPLIT NOW ALONG SECTARIAN LINES, BUT ALL OF MINISTERS SHARED HIS CONCERNS ABOUT SITUATION AND WERE VERY DEPRESSED. THE PRIME MINISTER WAS VERY LOYAL TO SARKIS BUT NEVERTHELESS HAD TRIED TO TELL PRESIDENT HE MUST BE MORE DECISIVE. HE HAD HAD NO LUCK. BOUTROS, WHO ALSO SHARED HIS MISGIVINGS PRIVATELY, WAS DEFENDING PRESIDENT LIKE A GOOD LAWYER. HE, SALMAN, HAD SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED RESIGNING BECAUSE HE NO LONGER WANTED TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH A DO-NOTHING GOVERNMENT BUT HAD DECIDED HIS RESIGNATION WOULD NOT HELP AND THAT HE WOULD STAY ON FOR THE TIME BEING. THINGS COULD NOT CONTINUE AS THEY WERE FOR VERY LONG, HOWEVER, IN THE ABSENCE OF SOME DECISIVE ACTION BY SARKIS.

8. I ASKED WHAT HE THOUGHT SARKIS SHOULD DO AND HE SAID THE FIRST THING TO DO WAS TO ASSEMBLY CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM POLITICAL LEADERS (HE MENTIONED CHAMOUN, GEMAYEL, KARAMI, SALAM, JUNBLATT, KAMAL AL-ASSAD AND FRANGIEH) AND TELL THEM THE COUNTRY WAS IN CRISIS. THEY WOULD HAVE TO COOPERATE OR IT WAS GOING UNDER. IF

THEY REFUSED TO COOPERATE, HE WOULD AT LEAST HAVE MADE AN EFFORT AND WOULD BE NO WORSE OFF. HE SAID THIS PROCEDURE HAD BEEN RECOMMENDED TO SARKIS BY THE CABINET BUT SARKIS HAD RAISED NUMEROUS OBJECTIONS. SARKIS REALIZED HE WAS IN A DIFFICULT POSITION, BUT WHEN HE ASKED THE CABINET WHAT HE SHOULD DO AND THEY TOLD HIM, HE REFUSED TO ACT.

9. I ASKED SALMAN WHAT HE THOUGHT WE SHOULD DO IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES. HE SAID FIRST WE SHOULD MAKE IT CLEAR TO SARKIS THAT OUR SUPPORT WAS NOT UNLIMITED. I SHOULD IMPRESS ON HIM THE NECESSITY FOR TAKING DECISIONS, AND THAT IF HE DID NOT START DOING SO WE WOULD BE UNABLE TO SUPPORT HIM. I SAID EVERYBODY IN LEBANON WANTED ME TO GO TELL THE PRESIDENT HOW TO RUN HIS COUNTRY. WHILE I HAD SEEN A GOOD DEAL OF THE PRESIDENT, WE HAD SPENT VERY SECRET

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LITTLE TIME TALKING ABOUT INTERNAL POLITICS. MOST OF OUR CONVERSATIONS HAD DEALT WITH SOUTH, UNFORTUNATELY. IT WAS A VERY DELICATE BUSINESS FOR A FOREIGN AMBASSADOR TO GET INVOLVED IN TELLING A PRESIDENT OF A REPUBLIC HOW TO RUN HIS COUNTRY. I WOULD SEE WHAT COULD BE DONE, HOWEVER.

10. COMMENT. SALMAN'S REMARKS ARE THE FRANKEST AND MOST INFORMED I HAVE HEARD TO DATE ON THE BURGEONING GOVERNMENTAL CRISIS WHICH HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO A HEAD BY THE AYN AR-RUMMANEH AFFAIR. SARKIS IS IN TROUBLE. HIS CABINET IS DEMORALIZED. HE STILL HAS A POSSIBILITY OF SAVING THE SITUATION PROVIDING HE TAKES RESOLUTE ACTION. IT IS NOT IN HIS CHARACTER TO DO SO, HOWEVER. I AM SEEING BOUTROS THIS EVENING AND WILL DISCUSS WITH HIM THE POSSIBILITIES OF GETTING SOME MOVEMENT OUT OF THE PRESIDENCY. PARKER

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